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Substantive questions: role of the Department of Public Information in United Nations peacekeeping

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The Department of Public Information, in implementation of relevant provisions of General Assembly resolutions and working closely with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, has continued to provide planning and operational support to information components of peacekeeping operations, to the extent possible. Enhancing this capacity, as expressed by the Assembly, would enable the Department to contribute more effectively to mission planning and support and to efforts undertaken by mission information components to build and sustain public and governmental support for peacekeeping operations.

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I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 56/64 B of 24 December 2001, the General Assembly took note of the efforts of the Secretary-General to strengthen the public information capacity of the Department of Public Information for the establishment and day-to-day functioning of the information components of peacekeeping and other field operations of the United Nations. The Assembly also requested the Secretariat to continue to ensure the involvement of the Department from the planning stage of such future operations through interdepartmental consultations and coordination with other departments of the Secretariat, in particular with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, and to report thereon to the Committee on Information at its twenty-fourth session, including any possible proposals for enhancing the role of the Department in this regard.

2. In the same resolution, the Assembly noted the ongoing discussion on the report of the Secretary-General[1] on resource requirements for implementation of the report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations, stressed that the Department of Public Information should continue its efforts to strengthen its capacity to contribute significantly to the functioning of information components in United Nations peacekeeping operations and requested the Secretary-General to report in this regard to the Committee on Information at its twenty-fourth session. The present report is prepared in response to that request.

II. Planning and operational support for peace missions

3. The Secretary-General last updated the General Assembly on the Department's mandated promotional activities in the area of peace and security and its efforts to support peace missions, including through close cooperation with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the Department of Political Affairs, in September 2001.[2] Since then, in implementation of Assembly resolutions, the Department has pursued efforts to provide planning and operational support to as many of the 15 ongoing peacekeeping missions as possible and to a growing number of political and peace-building missions, including the mission in Afghanistan.

4. Since the mid-1990s, the Department's operational support for peace missions has substantially increased. These activities, coordinated by the Peace and Security Section, have been carried out within existing resources and in addition to the Department's mandated promotional activities in the area of peace and security. As a result, staff resources have been stretched to the limit, which has resulted in delaying publications and web-site updating, as well as other promotional activities. Furthermore, the increased attention devoted to public information in both peacekeeping and political missions has made it virtually impossible for the Department to provide adequate support to all these missions. Consequently, priority has been given to those missions that require immediate assistance.

5. The report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of the recommendations of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations and the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations described the role of the Department of Public Information, and in particular of the Peace and Security Section, in developing the strategies, policies and capacities required to effectively plan, deploy and support the public information components of peacekeeping operations.[3] It also described the Department's other mandated promotional activities in the area of peace and security and provided information on the Department's resources in this respect. The report noted that all these activities were important tasks that help the Organization disseminate information about its peacekeeping and related peace and security work and that the Department should continue to undertake such activities. For this reason, the Secretary-General did not wish to pursue an earlier proposal[4] to redeploy public information staff from the Department of Public Information to the Department of Peacekeeping Operations. He proposed, however, that a few public information specialists should be included in the Peacekeeping Strategic Planning Unit of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, requiring additional resources, and set out a proposed division of responsibilities between the two Departments.

6. In connection with public information capacity, for which four new posts were proposed, the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions noted that it was the first time that a dedicated public information unit had been requested within the Department of Peacekeeping Operations. The

Committee was aware of the importance of effective public information programmes in peacekeeping operations and the need to carefully identify and implement those programmes on the basis of objectives tailored to the specific needs of the missions concerned, including adequate resources for those programmes. It was of the opinion, however, that the Department of Public Information should have a dedicated technical unit to perform the functions described and that the operational activities and related programmes should be requested in the context of each peacekeeping mission. Accordingly, the Committee did not agree to the establishment of that functional capacity in the Department of Peacekeeping Operations.[5] The General Assembly, in its resolution 56/241 of 24 December 2001, inter alia, endorsed the conclusions and recommendations contained in the report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, subject to the provisions of that resolution.

7. It will be noted that resolution 56/255, on special subjects relating to the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2002-2003, adopted by the General Assembly on 24 December 2001, did not provide for any new resources related to the functions described above.

III. Collaboration with information components of peace missions

8. Notwithstanding its limited resources, the Department continues to collaborate with peace missions, including through its recent efforts to promote United Nations peacekeeping, peacemaking and peace-building. For example, it worked closely with the Organization's peace missions to revive the publication *The Year in Review* with an issue entitled *United Nations Peace Operations in 2001*, a compilation of stories from the field.

9. The Department has also continued planning and operational support where possible. For example, the Department worked with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations during the early stages of developing a concept for establishing radio stations for the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and later reviewed the memorandum of understanding that was drawn up between the United Nations and Fondation Hirondelle to implement the project. The Department screened and recommended candidates to fill a number of public information posts and followed up on their deployment. In addition, the Department temporarily deployed one information officer to the office of the Facilitator for the Inter-Congolese Dialogue during the meeting in Addis Ababa in October 2001 and the subsequent meeting in Sun City, South Africa, which began late in February 2002.

10. The Department continues to assist the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) in arranging to make its radio programmes available on the Internet by posting audio files on the UNMEE page of the United Nations web site. The Department also explored with UNMEE possibilities for radio broadcasts on commercially available transmitters and participated in discussions on UNMEE's public information strategy.

11. The Department recently collaborated with the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) to help revamp the UNMIK web site, which is now linked to the UNMIK page of the main United Nations web site. The Department also provided the United Nations Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina (UNMIBH) with advice on the use of the United Nations logo, format and links in its redesigned web site.

12. The Department has continued to participate in weekly video conferences with the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) as well as in inter-agency task force meetings to collaborate and coordinate with other relevant departments and the field mission, including in the area of public information. The UNAMSIL Chief of Public Information is a staff member of the Department of Public Information. The Department also assisted in the development and expansion of Radio UNAMSIL in its early stages.

13. The Department continues to work closely with the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) in publicizing its work by formatting and posting its press briefing notes, UNTAET regulations and mission publications on the United Nations web site. It provides similar assistance to UNAMSIL and UNMEE. The Department also worked closely with UNTAET on a photo exhibit and is now collaborating with it in organizing events in connection with East Timor's day of independence, in May 2002.

14. The Department routinely organizes induction sessions at United Nations Headquarters for newly appointed chiefs of information to familiarize them with standard practices and Headquarters resources. The newly appointed chiefs of public information for UNAMSIL, UNMEE, UNTAET, UNMIK and the United Nations Verification Mission in Guatemala recently participated in this programme.

IV. Interdepartmental consultations and coordination

15. The Department has continued its consultations with other Secretariat departments in the planning of new peace missions and in support of existing missions.

16. In support of the Organization's efforts to define and plan its role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, consultation between the Department and other substantive departments has intensified, in particular within the context of the Integrated Management Task Force for Afghanistan, established in October 2001. The membership of the Task Force has included a representative of the Department who has actively participated in mission planning and support activities. Working with several interested non-governmental organizations, the Department also prepared an assessment of needs for the media sector in Afghanistan, which was incorporated into the needs assessment report for the International Conference on Reconstruction Assistance to Afghanistan, held in Tokyo in January 2002. However, the intensive nature of the Task Force's work, combined with the limitations of staff resources, significantly affected work in other areas. For example, the publication of a background paper on United Nations peace-building missions was delayed until early in 2002. There was also a considerable delay in publishing the above-mentioned *The Year in Review: United Nations Peace Operations in 2001*. Only the English edition came out in print and on the Web in December 2001. Other language editions were delayed, due principally to a lack of staff resources. Preparations for the meeting of field information chiefs, mentioned in paragraph 17 below, were also affected.

17. At the initiative of the Department of Public Information, a meeting of information chiefs of United Nations peacekeeping, peace-building and other field missions was held at Headquarters in December 2001. The meeting, jointly organized and sponsored by the Department of Public Information, the Department of Political Affairs, and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, brought together some 34 field personnel and a large number of their departmental colleagues from Headquarters. The aim of the meeting was to provide participants with a strategic overview of public information in peace operations and to encourage discussion of issues, problems and solutions related to public information work in the field. The meeting also allowed participants to share best ideas, techniques and initiatives and to learn more about existing support structures at Headquarters. The compilation of a report on the meeting, however, was delayed due to limited staff resources.

18. The March 2002 meeting of field presences, organized by the Department of Political Affairs, contained a segment on public information organized by the Department of Public Information. Feedback from the two meetings will be used to finalize the Department's draft guidelines for special representatives of the Secretary-General on matters relating to public information.

19. The Department of Public Information has continued to screen and recommend candidates for public information posts in United Nations peace missions. It has now become standard practice for the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the Department of Political Affairs to seek Department of Public Information expertise in this regard.

20. Ongoing consultations are being held with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and other parts of the Secretariat regarding the further formulation of standard operating procedures for public information components in peace missions and on other projects. The subjects addressed include start-up kits, new information technologies, rapid deployment and a conceptual design for an integrated process for establishing a new field information operation. Once new standard operating procedures are in place, it will be difficult for the Department to implement some complex tasks effectively without additional staff resources.

V. Enhancing the role of the Department in supporting peace operations

21. The General Assembly has reiterated on numerous occasions that it attaches priority to effective public information programmes in peacekeeping operations and the need to carefully identify and implement those programmes on the basis of objectives tailored to the specific needs of the missions concerned, including adequate resources for those programmes. In the same vein, as noted in paragraph 2 above, the General Assembly stressed in its resolution 56/64 B that the Department of Public Information should continue its efforts to strengthen its capacity to contribute significantly to the functioning of information components in United Nations peacekeeping operations.

22. However, despite the General Assembly's endorsement of the information support functions of the Department of Public Information, the number of staff dedicated to public information in United Nations peacekeeping has remained at the same level. For this reason, and as a follow-up to the recommendation of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions mentioned in paragraph 6 above, the report of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly on requirements for funding under the support account for peacekeeping operations for the period 1 July 2002 to 30 June 2003 will include a provision for additional resources for the Department of Public Information for the purpose of backstopping peacekeeping operations.

VI. Conclusions

23. There is widespread agreement that sustained public and governmental support is critical for the success of United Nations peacekeeping, peacemaking and peace-building operations. There is clearly a great deal more to be done. To enable the Department of Public Information to contribute more effectively to the planning and ongoing support of those operations, particularly in the case of large and complex peacekeeping operations, the need for adequate resources cannot be overemphasized.

24. The additional resources for the Department of Public Information referred to in paragraph 22 above, should they be approved by the General Assembly, would enable the Department to enhance its capacity to backstop public information activities in peacekeeping operations, as requested by the General Assembly, and at the same time to maintain its mandated promotional activities in the area of peace and security.

Notes

[1] A/55/507 and Add.1.

[2] See A/56/411, paras. 34 and 35.

[3] See A/55/977, paras. 239-241 and annex M.

[4] See A/55/502, paras. 133-138.

[5] See A/56/478, para. 32.